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ABSTRACT

This study examined students' beliefs about themselves as writers and about their experiences of learning through writing. A sample of 30 students enrolled in 2 freshman composition classes at a medium-sized Midwestern university completed a 74-item inventory measuring student writing approaches. Following administration of the inventory, 13 students with the highest scores were selected for semi-structured interviews. Five types of student writing approaches were identified: (1) elaborative, which views writing as deeply personal and marked by a search for personal meaning; (2) low self-efficacy, a highly fearful approach based on doubting ability and thinking about writing as a painful task; (3) reflective-revisionist, which describes a writing orientation based on a sophisticated understanding of the revision process; (4) spontaneous-impulsive, which profiles an impulsive, unplanned approach; and (5) the procedural approach, a method-driven strategy based on strict adherence to rules and minimal involvement. The report concludes that an understanding of student perceptions about their writing is important to helping them gain a positive identity in writing as a precursor to acquiring increased skills. (Contains 29 references.) (CH)

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Running Head: UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' BELIEFS

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University Students' Beliefs about Writing and Writing Approaches

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Abstract

University students' beliefs about themselves as writers and about the experience of learning in writing were investigated as related to writing approaches as measured by the Inventory of Processes in College Composition (Lavelle, 1993). General findings included variation in students' conceptions of writing, in their attitudes about themselves as writers, and in their felt need for personal expression in writing. In particular, writers scoring high on the Elaborative scale were found to be more aware of their writing process, and to view writing in a more personal manner than students scoring high on the other scales. Students scoring high on the Reflective-Revisionist scale also acknowledged the role of process as directed toward making a logical meaning in writing. Both Elaboratives and Reflective-Revisionists reported using writing to change their thinking, and an intuitive awareness regarding the completion of their compositions. Low Self-Efficacy writers reported that writing was largely a painful experience. Procedural and Spontaneous-Impulsive, both surface approaches, may alternate between "getting it all out," and relying on the rules as they move toward the deeper orientations. Implications for instruction are included.

The Relationship of University Students' Beliefs about Writing and Writing Approaches

Although cognitive models have focused on describing the processes of writing in terms of problem solving (Flower & Hayes, 1979), schema representation (McCutchen,1986), and cognitive development (Bereiter & Scardamalia,1987), the powerful nature of written composition as a tool of critical thinking has not been well explicated. In the area of university learning, learning style models have addressed the consistent relationship of students' conceptions of learning to study processes and, subsequently, to learning outcomes (eg Biggs,1987; Entwistle, 1979, 1986; Schmeck, 1983; Schmeck, Geisler-Brenstein & Cercy, 1991). The same notion has been employed to explain university students orientations toward writing (Biggs, 1988a, 1988b; Lavelle, 1993, 1997). The primary goal of the present research is to examine university writing approaches as measured by the *Inventory of Processes in College Composition* (Lavelle, 1993) in relation to students' beliefs about the nature of writing, and about themselves as writers. A secondary goal is to use interview data to further validate the *Inventory of Processes in College Composition*.

A Learning Styles Paradigm

Models of college learning styles (Biggs, 1987; Entwistle, 1979,1986; Schmeck,1983; Schmeck et al 1991) have offered a comprehensive perspective on how it is that tertiary students think about and go about academic tasks such as reading (Marton

& Saljo, 1976), studying (Schmeck, 1983) and academic writing (Biggs, 1988a, 1988b; Lavelle, 1993, 1997). The learning styles assumption has been that students' beliefs or conceptions of learning consistently affect the pattern of strategies which, in turn, affect learning outcomes: Conceptions->Processes->Outcomes (Van Rossum & Schenk, 1984). Grigerenko & Sternberg (as cited in Raynor & Riding, 1997) have categorized learning styles as "cognition- centered," often refered to as cognitive or perceptual styles (eg. global/analytic), "personality-centered," (eg. introversion/extroversion) and "activity-centered," implying a more relational, interactive perspective. In the activity-centered perspective, there is greater emphasis on the interaction of individual differences with instruction, redefinition of the style construct to emphasize a more fluid, modifiable variable based on the relationship between the learner to the situation of learning, a learning approach. Here, emphasis is on the modifiabilty of the approach through instruction. Finally, the approach models build and define theory based on factor analysis of learning questionnaire responses (cf. Rayner & Ryder, 1997). A basic distinction found in the learning approach models (eg. Biggs, 1978; Entwistle, 1979; Schmeck, 1983) involves a distinction between students who adopt a deep, meaningful approach to learning based on seeing the task as a whole and as personally relevant, and those who favor a surface perspective based on viewing learning as reproducing information and as reliant on memorization.

The approach model may be drawn upon to explain writing at the university level. Within the corpus lie diverse methodologies as well as multiple foci. Studies have addressed variation in writers' beliefs (Hounsell,1984; Prosser & Webb, 1994 Ryan, 1984,

Silva & Nicholls, 1993), strategies (Biggs, 1988a, 1988b, Lavelle, 1993, 1997), and the structure of written outcomes (Biggs & Collis, 1982, Prosser & Webb, 1994). Some studies employed psychometric methods (Lavelle, 1993, 1997, Ryan, 1984, Silva & Nicholls, 1995) while others employed qualitative methodologies (Entwistle,1994, Entwistle & Entwistle, 1991, Hounsell, 1984, Prosser & Webb, 1994). Results support two core writing approaches. The deep approach is based on seeing writing as a learning opportunity, a need for self-expression, a full consideration of audience, and employing an in-depth revision strategy. Surface writing, on the other hand, is based on viewing writing as a slow and tedious process, listing information, overreliance on the "rules," and using editing as a revision strategy (see Appendix).

The Factor Structure of University Writing

Working from a psychometric perspective, Lavelle (1993) factor analyzed students' responses to 119 items reflecting strategies, motives and conceptions regarding the function and purpose of writing. Five factors emerged. The first factor "Elaborationist" is marked by a search for personal meaning, self-investment, and by viewing writing as symbolic: a deep personal orientation. High scores on the Elaborative dimension have been related to the degree of personal involvement in writing a narrative essay (Lavelle, 1997) but were not predictive of general competence in academic writing (Lavelle, 1993). Similarly, in college learning, researchers have identified an Elaborative processing approach related to deep learning but based on using a self-referencing strategy.

Elaborative processors look for personal relevance in learning and apply new information in a personal manner (Schmeck, Geisler-Brenstein, & Cercy, 1991).

The second factor "Low Self-Efficacy" describes a highly fearful approach based on doubting ability and thinking about writing as a painful task. Writers scoring high on this scale are virtually without a writing strategy and represent the "flip" side of the Elaborative approach. College writing performance is associated with self-efficacy (Meier, McCarthy & Schmeck, 1984) and self-esteem (Daly & Wilson, 1983).

"Reflective-Revisionist," the third factor, describes a deep writing orientation based on a sophisticated understanding of the revision process as a remaking or rebuilding of one's thinking, similar to Silva and Nicholls (1993) logical reasoning factor. Reflective-Revision implies taking willingness to take charge in writing to make meaning for themselves and for the audience. Reflective-Revision scale scores predicted high grades in a freshman composition course (Lavelle, 1993).

The fourth factor, "Spontaneous-Impulsive," profiles an impulsive and unplanned orientation similar to Biggs' Surface Restrictive approach (1988a). Spontaneous-Impulsive writers may overestimate their skill because they are actually afraid to deal with what they perceive as their limitations, their approach is basically defensive.

The "Procedural" approach represents a method-driven strategy based on strict adherence to the rules and a minimal amount of involvement, similar to Silva and Nicholl's methodological orientation (1993), Berieter's communicative (1980), or Bigg's Surface-Elaborative (1988a) orientations. Such writers ask themselves, "Where can I put this

information that I just came across?" If writers are unsure of themselves, the rules may keep them afloat or as Stafford (1978) says in *Writing the Australian Crawl*

> But swimmers know that if they relax on the water, it will prove to be miraculously buoyant and writers know that a succession of little strokes on the material nearest them--without any prejudgements about the specific gravity of the topic or reasonableness of their expectations--- will result in creative progress (p 23)

Reflective-Revisionist and Elaborationist represent deep, meaningful orientations with Procedural, Spontaneous-Impulsive and Low Self-Efficacy interpreted as surface orientations. Reflective-Revisionist represents a deep thinking, analytic component while Elaborationist represents the more personal and affective dimension in writing similar to Silva and Nicholl's aesthetic and expressive goals orientation (1993).

Writing approaches are relational in nature. They represent, at the global level, writer's beliefs about writing and intentions (a more consistent components) as well as writing strategies which are largely modifiable with instruction. In a recent study, Biggs, Lao, Tang & Lavelle (in press) found increased Elaborative scale scores and decreased Spontaneous-Impulsive and Procedural scores for graduate students writing in English as a Second language enrolled in a two day academic writing workshop. Students may use spontaneous writing as a tool to get it all started, then move toward refining via genre familiarity and procedures, and finally moving toward a deep result.

In the present study, we wanted to investigate students' experiences of writing as reflected in personal interviews and as related to their performance on the *Inventory of*

Processes in College Composition (IPIC). The phenonomographic or second order method, involving querying students as to the nature of their writing experiences, had previously been used in college writing research by Entwistle (1994) in investigating the knowledge object--an emergent structure reflecting students' understanding in preparing for written examinations. Similarly, Prosser and Webb (1994) had interviewed students and supported deep and surface approaches in terms of students' conceptions of academic essay writing, and Ryan (1984) linked epistemological beliefs to college students' definitions of coherence in writing and to writing outcomes. Now we sought students' comments on developing knowledge as per writing approaches as measured by the Inventory of *Processes in College Composition* (1993). In line with earlier research on the role of selfhood in writing (cf. Daly & Wilson, 1983; Lavelle, 1997; Meier et al ,1984), we particularly wanted to relate students' personal interpretations of themselves as writers to writing processes. We hypothesized that students adopting a deep approach in writing, as measured by the Reflective-Revisionist and Elaborative scales of the IPIC, would be more likely to define themselves as writers, have a more positive writing self-concept, and describe the expereince of writing as involving learning and changes in thinking. We also suspected that there would be less concern for how much time the writing task took among Reflective-Revisionist and Elaborative writers than among writers scoring high on the surface level scales (Low Self-Efficacy, Procedural, Spontaneous-Impulsive).

Method

Sample

The sample consisted of 30 students enrolled in two freshman composition classes at a medium sized midwestern university. Of the total 17 were male and 13 were female. After administering the IPIC to all students, we selected 13 students for interviews based on having high scores on each of the IPIC factors.

Instrumentation

The *Inventory of Processes in College Composition* (previously discussed) is a 74-item scale measuring five college writing approaches. Reliability estimates for the scales were acceptable .83-.66, and content, concurrent and predictive validity were supported in the original development of the scales (Lavelle, 1993, 1997).

Procedures

The IPIC was administered during a regular 50-minute class period. Students were instructed to respond on a four level Likert format on computerized answer sheets. Participation was voluntary. Thirteen students were chosen for interviews based on high scores on the scales. Interviews were conducted in a private office and tape recorded for transcription.

Interview Format

A semi-structured interview format was used. We chose this design to reflect students' emerging comments regarding their self-concepts as writers and their experiences of learning in the writing situation. Two minor questions involved writing preferences and students' perception of time as related to engaging in writing tasks. Focus on "how long it takes" had been associated with surface learning, and narrative writing preference had been related to the Elaborative approach (Lavelle, 1997). Previously, Entwistle and

Entwistle (1991) had interviewed students regarding the nature of their understanding as related to their preparation for a written examination. We sought to apply the same method in determining and categorizing general trends, and comments as related to scale scores.

After introducing herself, the interviewer individually asked each student the following:

1. Who are you as a writer?
2. What types of writing tasks do you prefer? Why?
3. Describe your experience of writing. Does your thinking change in writing? Your interpretation of the task?
4. Are you concerned about how much time your writing task takes?

Results

Thirteen students were selected for the interview according to high scores and then characterized by dominant writing approaches. Table 1 reflects IPIC Scale Means and Table 2 reflects individual students' scores. Interestingly, students scoring high on more that one scale reflected either the deep or surface dichotomy with one exception, Matt, who also scored high on Procedural, a surface scale.

[Table 1]
[Table 2]

Albert	Low Self-Efficacy/ Procedural
Kathy	Elaborative/Reflective-Revisionist
Tara	Elaborative
Bob	Procedural
Joe	Low Self-Efficacy/ Procedural
Barb	Elaborative
Carol	Reflective-Revisionist
Mary	Spontaneous-Impulsive
Matt	Elaborative/ Reflective-Revisionist/Procedural
Mike	Low Self-Efficacy
Crista	Reflective-Revisionist
Mellanie	Low Self-Efficacy/ Spontaneous-Impulsive

Jack Elaborative

A pervasive trend which emerged involved students' awareness of the role of process in writing as related to their writing approaches. High Elaboratives and Reflective-Revisionists, both deep approaches, articulately and consistently voiced process as a critical component, inseparable from product. In particular, high Elaboratives linked process to self-expression. Barb, an Elaborative, states " ...I pick up an idea and start ...the topic may change as I go but it's still the way that I think, it expresses who I am." Interestingly, all deep writers were comfortable in fully articulating their writing processes, and students scoring high on any of the surface scales--Low Self-Efficacy, Spontaneous-Impulsive, and Procedural--were not similarly inclined.

Elaborative and Reflective-Revisionist writers described process as primarily related to changing one's own thinking about the topic: a feeling of satisfaction and wholeness (cf. Entwistle, 1994). One Elaborative felt that often his thinking changed so much in writing that he readily developed ideas for subsequent papers. Matt, an Elaborative, Reflective-Revisionist who also scored high on the Prodedural scale, stated, "Sometimes I change direction and I change as an individual because it gives me a new look, it changes my life." Similarly, Kathy, an Elaborative and Reflective-Revisionist, stated, "Ideas develop in writing as I go. I start with one idea but finish in a different direction," and Carol, a Reflective-Revisionist claimed "My ideas about writing change when I look at what others have written--class evaluation is very important." However, neither deep nor surface writers consistently cited classroom revision or peer comments as critical to their processes. Although both Reflective-Revisionists and Elaboratives

expressed a willingness to fully engage with the topic and concern for an intricate structure, Elaboratives more consistently cited meaning as personally relevant, and spoke to the impact of writing on their lives.

Along the same line, Elaborative writers reported having an awareness or feeling as to the completeness of their composition. Tara, an Elaborative, states "It's like your clothes--maybe the colors or style are not right--its a feeling that you get when something's missing." Similarly, Jack described his process, "If the concept is large, writing simplifies it. I see the task changing and have a feeling if something is missing--it kinda evolves." The awareness of what's missing has been described as a critical component of the emergent "knowledge object "an organizational structure of knowledge (Entwistle,1994). It is likely that this "intuition" is related to Elaboratives' emotional connection to their product. Clearly Elaboratives bring an strong affective dimension to their writing, one that affords them skill in troubleshooting.

Surprisingly, only two students saw themselves as writers in response to the prompt "Who are you as a writer?" Again, both scored high on the Elaborative scale. Jack reported "It's not easy but I know what I'm doing," and Matt claimed "I'm confident, I wear the hat. I feel fine about writing papers--I see myself as a good writer." It is, perhaps this personal orientation of seeking self-expression that leads one to developing an identity as a writer. Jack states "I think of myself as a writer. I won't say it comes easy. Writing is for me and if someone else doesn't like it that is their bag. It's about personal growth often through reading and having a revelation."

Here, a basic distinction may be made between deep and Elaborative writers involving personal relevance and the role that self-reference plays. Although Reflective-Revisionist writers emphasize the synthesis of information, extensive revision, process awareness, they did not report a great deal of concern for personal expression or for their personal relationship to writing. Their comments were more factual and concise, whereas Elaboratives seemed more inclined to "tell the story" of their writing. Elaboratives also referred to their feelings about writing and to personal ownership of their documents more than Reflective-Revisionists. Barb states "Writing expresses who I am. I like to pick my topic--things that I have experience with." She also keeps a journal as does Tara. Tara stated "I feel that what I write is my opinion. I think writing is therapeutic, it calms you and helps you realize things more, because in your head it's a mind race, and writing makes my own understanding more clear." Elaboratives' interviews were longer and more in-depth. Only Reflective-Revisionists specifically cited making their ideas clear to the audience, but it may be that Elaboratives take this for granted.

The three surface scales were also supported by the interviews. Writers scoring high on Low Self-Efficacy reported disliking writing. For example, Mike said "I hate writing, I only write if I have to," and Joe said, in a low almost inaudible tone, "I write because I have to, I put my thoughts on paper, it seems to take a long time." Similarly, Bob, a high Procedural, responds, "I have no writing preference. If there is a process, it's just pretty unorganized. I write stuff down. Writing just rolls off the top of my head, and then I reorder." Mary, a Spontaneous-Impulsive, commented "I just sit down with no planning and organize a bit after--it usually takes me 15 minutes to an hour from start to

finish." No surface writers reported emphasizing revision, understanding their own process, or needing self-expression. Most spoke in a very low tone and answered in brief responses, although the interviewer made every effort to help them to feel at home. One exception was Albert, a Low Self-Efficacy/Procedural writer. Stating that he writes better without pressure, he cited his attempt to organize with the goal of meeting the requirements. He claimed that he has come a long way, and he is concerned with how much time his assignments take. He prefers writing by hand but is easily distracted. Albert took pride in his progress which may be a key to helping basic writers. His attitude was fairly positive, and he was able to acknowledge his shortcomings in writing. This self-acceptance accompanied by a modicum of pride may serve to keep surface writers "afloat." Similarly a certain degree of reliance on procedure may, as Stafford has articulated, keep poor writers "afloat" (Stafford, 1978).

Discussion

Interviews with student writers have extended the research on writing approaches along several lines. Writers' perceptions of the writing situation including writing self-concept and beliefs about the function of composition emerge as critical components. In terms of instruction, it is important to help writers to gain a positive identity in writing as a precursor to acquiring increased skills. Similarily, students need to be familiar with how writing works as a tool of learning and of self-expression. Instructors might have students read essays on the nature of writing and share their own perspectives on the role of process to gain an awareness of how writing functions. This may be especially critical for Low Self-Efficacy writers.

Spontaneous-Impulsive and Procedural strategies may represent progress at an early stage of writing development. Indeed, getting it all out or free writing is a well respected instructional tactic in composition (Elbow, 1998), and, as Stafford says "Reliance on the rules keeps you afloat." It is as though writing is a dialectic between intention and form. Here, combining the two strategies as a beginning step might advance writing skills for novice writers, as well as for writers faced with mastering a new genre. Future research should fully investigate this hypothesis.

Students' writing approaches are not alone in affecting writing performance: teachers' own beliefs about the nature and complexity of composition affects their own behavior which, in turn, influences student performance (cf. Good & Brophy, 1990). Although writing is a qualitative phenomenon, emphasis is often placed largely on the acquisition of skills as critical to improvement, as though "more" is better. But the quality of writing rests on intentionality, affect and writing self-concept as well as on competence in rhetorical manipulation. By being familiar with students' approaches to writing, teachers can gain a more sensitive paradigm as well as increased insight into specific student needs. The *Inventory of Processes in College Composition* provides a valid diagnostic tool as well as a model for teachers and researchers. Future research should address variation of scale scores as related to writing instruction.

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Table 1

Means and Standard Deviations for the IPIC Scale Scores

Scale	Mean	Sd	Range
Elaborationist	16.3	4.5	8-24
Low Self-Efficacy	5.9	2.7	1-10
Reflective-Revisionist	10.5	3.9	4-26
Spontaneous-Impulsive	8.8	3.3	2-15
Procedural	6.6	2.1	3-10

Table 2

Students with High Scores on the Inventory of Processes in College Composition

Students	Elab	L S E	R R	S I	Pr
Kathy	21		12		
Carol			12		
Mary				14	
Barb	24				
Joe		9			
Albert		9			9
Bob					10
Tara	22				
Christa			12		
Jack	22				
Mike		9			
Melanie		10		15	
Matt	21		12		10

Appendix

Deep and Surface Writing Orientations of University Students

Deep Writing	Surface Writing
Metacognitive, Reflective	Redundant, Reproductive
High or alternating level of focus	Focus at the local level
Hierarchical organization	Linear, sequential structure
Engagement, self-referencing	Detachment
Actively making meaning (agentic)	Passive ordering of data
Audience concern	Less audience concern
Thinks about essay as an integrated whole	Sees essay as an organized display
Thesis-driven	Data-driven
Revision	Editing
Transforming, going beyond assignment	Telling within the given context
Autonomous	Rule-bound
Teacher independent	Teacher dependent
Feelings of satisfaction, coherence and connectedness	